United States Assay Office
210 Main Street
Boise
Ada County
Idaho

HABS No. Id-10

HABS
ID,
1-BOISE,
20-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washin gton, D.C. 20240

HABS
ID,
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20-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

UNITED STATES ASSAY OFFICE HABS No. ID-10

Location: 210 Main Street, Boise, Ada County, Idaho; Block 35 in the Townsite of Boise City.
Lattitude: 43° 31' 43" N. Logitude: 116° 11' 43" W.

Present Owner: The State of Idaho.

Present Occupant: The Idaho Bicentennial Commission and the State Inspector of Mines.

Present Use: Offices.

Significance: One of the earliest monumental structures in the Northwest, the Assay Office opened in March 1872. It was designed in Washington, D.C. by A. B. Mullett's office, the office of the supervising architect of the Treasury Department. The building operated as an assay office from 1872-1933, and has always symbolized the importance of Idaho's mines. The State plans to turn this venerable structure into a mining museum.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Dates of erection: Ground breaking ceremonies occurred on July 16, 1870; although virtually finished in October 1871 the building did not open until March 1872.

2. Architect: The plans and specifications were prepared in A. B. Mullet's office in Washington, D.C.—Mullett was the supervisory architect for the Teasury Department.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The U.S. Assay Office stands on Block 35 in the Townsite of Boise, Idaho. Reference is made to the title in the Deed Books and on microfilm at the Ada County Courthouse, Boise, Idaho. The following represents an incomplete chain of tilte (documented by C. Stanley Skiler for HABS)

1867 "The original Townsite of Boise City was executed and filed pursuant to federal statute, title in all lands shown therein vested in Boise City in Trust for the occupants of the Townsite, to be disposed of by the mayor of the city as provided by law."

1869 Quit claim, July 8, 1868 recorded in Deed Book 3, p. 589. Alexander Rossi to the United States of America, signed by Lafayette Cartee and John McBride, Commissioners of the U.S. Land Office at Boise. "Block 35 for use by the government, as a United States Assay Office." (Skiler) Apparently for $1.00.

1869 Deed, September 29, 1869 recorded in Deed Book 3, p. 678. Charles Nimrod, mayor of Boise, to the United States. "It is recorded in the deed that it is the same Block 35 set apart by the Land Commissioners on the part of the United States on which to locate an assay office." Apparently for $1.00.

1869 Deed, November 6, 1869 recorded in Deed Book 3, p. 710. "Charles Nimrod, as mayor of Boise City, conveying the same Block 35 to the United States of America, for the consideration of $1.00. It is recorded in this deed that the deed is executed pursuant to Ordinance No. 26 of Boise City authorizing the conveyance."

1972 Quit claim deed, October 25, 1972 recorded October 27, 1972 as Instrument 824753 on microfilm (132 0654) in the Ada County Recorder's Office. The United States of America to the Idaho State Historical Society. "Block 35, City of Boise, located in SE 1/4 Section 10, Township 3 North, Range 2 East, Boise Meridian, Ada County."

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Although Lafayette Cartee was originally designated to supervise construction, John R. McBride actually did the work. The sandstone for the walls was quarried locally.

5. Original plan and construction: General Cartee was given the plans in January 1870. The allocation for the building was $75,000. Critical of some details of the specifications Cartee suggested certain modifications such as using native woods for the interior furnishing, instead of the specified hardwoods, which would have to be imported from San Francisco (John Hussey, "Building Most Valuable: The Start of the U.S. Assay Office" (Idaho Yesterday, Spring, 1961, Vol. V. Number 1), and said the building would cost $73,000. Mullett, believing that an estimate of $73,000 would mean an actual expenditure of more than the appropriated $75,000 recommended to the Secretary of the Treasury that the appropriation be repealed.

However, James Reynolds, the editor of the Idaho Tri-Weekly Statesman and John R. McBride, recent Supreme Court Judge for the Idaho Territory, were in Washington at this time, and Judge McBride "offered to erect the building within the appropriated sum." (Hussey, p. 6), George S. Botweld, then Secretary of the Treasury, "is said to have replied that if McBride would pledge himself personally to carry out the offer he would be appointed Treasury agent and superintendent of construction." (Hussey, p. 6) McBride agreed to do this, and the building got underway; groundbreaking occurred on July 16, 1870. (Idaho Territorial Statesman, p. 3)

By January 12, 1871 the walls were nearly complete and the Statesman reported that in ten days the cornice work would begin with the roof and cupola soon to follow. On January 26th the paper noted:

> "The putting on of the cornice work of the Assay Office has commenced. The workmen are engaged in raising the huge stones to their places with a capstan. The largest one, weighing at least three tons, intended as the cap stone for the dormer windows in front, will be hoisted up in a day or two--unless something breaks." (Idaho Statesman, p. 3)

On April 20, 1871 the paper explained "work on the Assay Office is being driven ahead as fast as circumstances will permit. A force of fifteen men is employed. Judge McBride estimates that the building will be completed and ready for the reception of assaying works in about six weeks." By May 4th the stone masons were doing finish work and the roof was about to be put on.

The Statesman reported on June 1 that the Assay Office was "undergoing the finishing touches. The stone and brick workers have about resigned to the workers in wood. The roof is on, all but the tin work. The cupola is about finish..." (p. 3)

On March 2, 1872, the paper announced that the "U.S. Assay Office now fully equipped is doing a little business nearly every day." (p. 3) On the first floor there were: offices, vaults, safes for the storage and care of the precious metal, laboratory, assaying and melting rooms, with their proper complements, cabinet for re-agents, assaying and melting furnaces, crucibles, molds, etc. The second floor is the residence of the assayer in charge, and is divided into kitchen, pantry, a dining room, three sleeping apartments and a parlor... a drybrick cellar extends under the whole building..." (P. 198)

6. Alterations and additions: In 1889 stone posts were set up around the lot. Metal rods connected with the posts formed a fence. A stone storehouse in the rear was also built at this time.

In 1890 "new floors were put in the operating rooms and 'a hot and cold water system' and incandescent electric lights were installed." (Hussey, p. 11)

The Assay Office closed June 10, 1933. The Forest Service, which had plans drawn up since 1931 to remodel the building as headquarters for the Boise and Payette National Forests, took over in 1933. The exterior changes were slight: "the removal of the iron bars from the windows and doors, the substitution of steel sash for original wood window frames and sash, and the piercing of the rear wall for the installation of six new windows. Perhaps at this time one of the large rear chimneys was removed, although this action may have been taken earlier. Inside the building the reverberatory furnace, the retort, vaults, and other equipment were removed and partitions rearranged. The remodeling cost $15,000." (Hussey, p. 13)

On August 7, 1972 the United States Government turned the building over to the State Historical Society; it will soon be used as a mining museum.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure: The history of the United States Assay Office in Boise is carefully described in John Hussey's article "Building Most Valuable: The Story of the Idaho Assay Office" prepared for the National Park Service and reprinted in Idaho Yesterdays Spring 1961, Vol. V, No. 1, pp. 2-13. The article is included in the field records for this site.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: The Idaho State Historical Society has several pictures of the building. It is also pictured in Elliott's History of Idaho of 1884, and in John Hussey's article.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Interviews with Arthur Hart on July 30, 1974, Boise, Idaho.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Elliott's History of Idaho. San Francisco: Elliott, 1884.

Hussey, John. "Building Most Valuable: The Story of the Idaho Assay Office" Idaho Yesterdays. Spring 1961, Vol. V, No. 1. Boise.

The Idaho Tri-Weekly Statesman (Boise, 1870-72, 76, 83).

The Idaho Daily Statesman (Boise, 1889).

Prepared by: Alan Minskoff
Historian
Historic American Buildings Survey
August 1974

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The United States Assay Office was one of the earliest monumental buildings constructed in the inland region of the Pacific Northwest. The applied decoration of coursed, rustic sandstone with ashlar quoins and window openings is almost wholly confined to classic pediments over the front entrance and over the upper center window to the bracketted eaves. This two-story structure is one of five buildings constructed in the United States for use as a Government Assay Office.

2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The building is forty-eight feet wide, forty-six feet long and forty-five feet high (excluding the basement).

2. Foundation: The foundations are stone and are in good condition.

3. Wall construction, finish, and color: The walls are rusticated sandstone in courses with contrasting smooth quoins at building corners and around openings. The sandstone has taken on the patina created by carbon residues.

4. Structural system, framing: This building is stone bearing wall structure with interior brick bearing walls. The roof is wood frame.

5. Chimneys: There were two chimneys on the north (rear) face of the building. One of these has been removed. There were chimneys on the sides (east and west) of this building which have been removed.

6. Openings:

a. Doorways: The primary entrance to the building is the south side of the building and is a recessed opening. The entryway is capped with a classic pediment. The access doors were originally protected by steel bar doors.

b. Windows: All original windows were wood double hung with iron bars which were replaced with steel sash. Iron bars on the first floor windows are a restoration. There are no iron bars on the second floor windows.

7. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: There is a hip roof covering this building. The roofing material is metal standing seam.

b. Cupola: There is a cupola which was used as a ventilator at the peak of this roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

a. Basement: There is a full basement under this building. This basement area contains the furnace room, meeting and storage rooms, and bathrooms. The basement contained supply and fuel rooms and guard's quarters.

b. First floor: The entrance leads into a corridor from which doors open into office spaces on both sides. The stair case, the full width of this corridor, leads to the offices on the second floor. The first floor contained the assayers' offices, vaults and safes for the storage of bullion, the assaying and melting rooms with their furnaces, the laboratory, and the storage cabinets for regents.

c. Second floor: This floor has been coverted to office space. The interior was well ordered. The second floor was devoted to the chief assayer's living quarters. There had been a parlor, pantry, dining room, kitchen, and three bedrooms.

2. Stairway: The main stair is an open-well stair to the second floor spaces.

3. Flooring: Many areas are covered with asphalt tile.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Painted plaster.

5. Doorways and doors: The doors are paneled doors with office doors having one light sash and solid panel doors in the basement. Interior doorways are simply detailed.

6. Interior finish:

   a. First floor: Battleship grey linoleum floors. Walls and woodwork were painted a two-tone gray, and ceilings were painted light grey.

   b. Second floor: Floors were mainly narrow hardwood flooring and linoleum in a few areas. Walls and ceilings were papered and woodwork was painted.

   c. Basement: Gray paint and concrete floors in work rooms, linoleum and light gray painted walls and woodwork in other spaces.

7. Hardware: Original hardware of cast brass and wrought iron seems to have all been replaced with simple brass locksets.

8. Lighting: Original lighting was gas and incandescent electric. No original lighting survives and flourescent lighting and some incandescent is standard throughout the building.

9. Heating: A fossil fuel fired boiler in the basement is used to heat this building. Heating was by radiation. Natural hot water was piped into the building. The original radiators were almost solid with corrosion.

D. Site:

General setting and orientation: This building faces south and stands alone on a fine treed site close to downtown Boise. One outbuilding is at the back (north) side of the building. The site is bound on all four sides with city streets and the space around the building is used as park area.

Prepared by: William B. McCroskey
Project Director
National Park Service
August 1974

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records are a part of the documentation made during the 1974 Idaho City Project undertaken by HABS in cooperation with the Idaho Bicentennial Commission. During the summer, records were made of various historic buildings in Idaho City and Boise.

The project was undertaken under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey. The project director was William B. McCroskey of the University of Idaho. The project historian was Alan Minskoff of the University of Chicago. The project foreman was Jack W. Shafer of the

University of Cincinnati, student assistant architects were Rae F. Noritake (University of Idaho), Larry Ferar (University of Oregon), and Mark T. Wellen (Texas Tech University). This material was edited by Eleni Silverman, HABS Historian, for transmittal to the Library of Congress in May 1984. Duane Garrett made the documentary photographs.